The threat of social decline: income inequality and radical right support

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ABSTRACT

Income inequality and radical right parties have both been on the rise in Western democracies, yet few studies explore the linkages between the two – despite prominent arguments about voters feeling 'left behind'. We argue that rising inequality not only intensifies relative deprivation, but also signals a potential threat of social decline, as gaps in the social hierarchy widen. Hence, voters higher up in the social hierarchy may turn to the radical right to defend existing social boundaries. Using International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) data from 14 OECD countries over three decades, we find that rising income inequality increases the likelihood of radical right support – most pronouncedly among individuals with high subjective social status and lower-middle incomes. Adding to evidence that the threat of decline, rather than actual deprivation, pushes voters towards the radical right, we highlight income inequality as the crucial factor conditioning perceived threats from a widening social hierarchy.

KEYWORDS: Income inequality, radical right, relative deprivation, social decline, social status

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Supplemental data for this article can be accessed at [JEPP website].

Introduction

Radical right parties (RRPs) have become successful political actors in many Western democracies. Several theories explain their success with a growing group of people who feel 'left behind' in the processes of globalisation and economic modernisation over the past several decades (Kitschelt 1995; Kriesi et al. 2008). Feeling threatened by increasing economic, cultural and political openness, they sympathize with RRPs that promise to put the nation and its people first. Income inequality can be treated as a summary indicator for the social and economic divides following the structural macroeconomic developments in advanced democracies, but only few studies take into account the role of income inequality for radical right support (Jesuit, Paradowski, and Mahler 2009; Han 2016; Rooduijn and Burgoon 2018; Burgoon et al. 2019; Engler and Weisstanner 2020). Moreover, the link between income inequality as a macro-level indicator and electoral outcomes is complex; there are several possible ways how changes in inequality affect different voters at the individual level, depending on their position in society or their income, and how this in turn might influence their voting behaviour. Some evidence suggests that income inequality may have an impact not only through material self-interest but also through feelings of social marginalization (Gidron and Hall 2019), yet there is no theoretical framework combining these different impacts of inequality on voting. In this paper, we address this gap by examining how the long-term trend towards rising income inequality affects support for RRPs among different voter groups.

We argue that rising income inequality is an important indicator not only of the extent to which some groups have *fallen behind* compared to others, but also of the *potential decline* in society that people higher up in the social hierarchy could face. The first logic is based on 'relative deprivation' theories (Runciman 1966) and implies that low-income groups, the main losers of rising inequality, become more likely to support RRPs in societies that grow more

unequal over time. The second logic is premised upon risk theories (Moene and Wallerstein 2001; Rehm 2016) and maintains that middle-income individuals face potentially large income losses in unequal societies and turn to RRPs, which promise to address anxieties about decline by opposing globalisation and open labour markets. The second hypothesis has received attention in recent studies showing that not actual labour market disadvantage but the threatening decline of those who still have income and prestige to lose explains support for the radical right (Rovny and Rovny 2017; Kurer forthcoming; Kurer and Palier 2019; Im et al. 2019).

Following Gidron and Hall (2017, 2019), we stay out of the debate about whether the rise of the radical right is rooted in economic or cultural changes; we argue that income inequality not only worsens the relative position of the less well-off in material terms but also their perceived social status. Subjective social status, defined as the 'level of social respect or esteem people believe is accorded them within the social order' (Gidron and Hall 2017, S61), is key in understanding how difficult economic circumstances lead to support for a party family that puts most emphasis on cultural, rather than economic issues (Mudde 2007). Without considering social status, RRPs, just like their radical left counterparts, are simply an alternative to mainstream parties because of their outsider status, anti-establishment claims and opposition to international trade and globalisation that might attract voters dissatisfied with their personal financial situation (Rooduijn and Burgoon 2018). When subjective social status is taken into account, the radical right becomes much more attractive because of its claims to restore the dignity of those left behind by cultivating nativism and therewith providing non-economic criteria of social status (Lipset 1959; Gidron and Hall 2017; Gest, Reny, and Mayer 2018).

The 'relative deprivation' logic leads us to expect that low-income and low-status individuals become more likely to support RRPs in societies that grow more unequal. In

contrast, following the 'threat of social decline' logic, we hypothesize that individuals higher up in the income and status hierarchy support the radical right as inequality increases and these individuals fear the possibility of a steep social decline. We test both claims using an encompassing individual-level dataset from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), comparing 14 OECD countries between 1987 and 2017. We find that rising income inequality increases the likelihood of RRP support and that this effect is most pronounced among individuals with high subjective social status and lower-middle incomes. In increasingly unequal societies, therefore, anxieties about social decline seem to matter more for RRP choice than does actual deprivation. Threats of decline are especially relevant with respect to subjective social status, which emerges as a crucial link between structural economic changes and the non-economic stances of RRPs. However, unlike Gidron and Hall (2017, 2019) we find that in societies that have grown more unequal, the radical right has a substantial electoral potential among high-status individuals, not among those whose subjective status has declined the most. For the most deprived groups with lowest social status, income inequality is more plausibly associated with radical left party support, which promote strongly redistributive platforms (Rooduijn et al. 2017; Burgoon et al. 2019). Yet for voters higher up in the social hierarchy, supporting RRPs could be seen as a reaction to perceived threats of decline from widening social hierarchies associated with rising income inequality.

We proceed as follows. The next section presents our theoretical framework, conceptualising the impact of income inequality for different income and status groups at the individual level, based on two theories: relative deprivation and the threat of social decline. We then describe our dataset and modelling strategy, and discuss our empirical findings and conclusions.

Theory

We develop our argument in two steps. Building on existing literature, we argue that support for radical right parties is related to two individual-level indicators for social stratification: income and subjective social status. Our own theoretical contribution then highlights how the context of rising income inequality affects the association between these socio-economic indicators and radical right support. We derive one set of hypotheses based on the 'relative deprivation' logic and another based on a 'threat of social decline' logic.

Income, social status and radical right voting

Radical right parties are characterized by their anti-establishment discourse, authoritarian values and nativist ideology (Mudde 2007). Because these parties strongly emphasise cultural issues, rising income inequality might not affect voters in purely economic terms (Inglehart and Norris 2017). We know that RRP voters are distinct not only in their underlying socio-economic profiles (Rooduijn et al. 2017; Rooduijn and Burgoon 2018), but also in how they perceive their social status (Lipset 1959; Gidron and Hall 2017, 2019). Both socio-economic characteristics and social status are important indicators of social stratification, and closely connected to inequality trends: Rising income inequality implies that the gap between different income groups increases. Moreover, rising inequality also changes the social status hierarchy in society (Ridgeway 2014; Gidron and Hall 2019). Our theoretical framework disentangles the impact of income inequality on RRP support at the individual level for different *income* and *status* groups. Before formulating hypotheses about rising inequality, we summarize existing research showing higher RRP support among both low-income and low status groups.

Many studies show that *income* is associated with voting for RRPs (Lubbers, Gijsberts, and Scheepers 2002; Rooduijn et al. 2017; Rooduijn and Burgoon 2018; Burgoon et al. 2019).

Although the effect seems weaker compared to other socio-economic characteristics like education, class or unemployment (Kriesi et al. 2008; Bornschier and Kriesi 2013), there are several theoretical mechanisms linking low income to RRP support. Those at the bottom of the income distribution use retrospective voting to punish mainstream parties and turn to RRPs, which present themselves as outsiders using anti-establishment rhetoric (Betz 1993; Bergh 2004). Additionally, the RRPs' nativism speaks to low-income workers who think that immigration and trade flows pose a stronger threat to their earnings. Thus, we assume a negative association between income and RRP support.

However, following Gidron and Hall (2017, 2019), we do not think that the rise of RRPs should be discussed in a solely economic framework. RRPs mainly politicise issues on the cultural dimension (Kriesi et al. 2008; Bornschier and Kriesi 2013). Therefore, another criterion of social stratification becomes important to understand how economic changes translate into support for RRPs: *subjective social status*. Max Weber (1968) famously distinguished social status as a form of stratification separate from class. Defined as a 'person's position within a hierarchy of social prestige' (Gidron and Hall 2017, S61), social status correlates with income or class, but is a conceptually distinct form of stratification, varying within income groups (Chan and Goldthorpe 2007).[1] There is also a clear link between income inequality and social status. As higher income inequality indicates steeper hierarchies in society, status differences become more pronounced in unequal societies (Ridgeway 2014; Layte and Whelan 2014; Wilkinson and Pickett 2018). When testing whether persons feeling 'left behind' are more likely to vote for RRPs independent from their actual income, we need to consider subjective social status in addition to income.

According to Gidron and Hall (2017) and going back to the 'status politics' thesis by Lipset (1959), subjective social status is key in understanding support for the radical right. While poor personal economic conditions can lead people to support *both* the radical right and the radical

left (Rooduijn and Burgoon 2018), those experiencing a decline in subjective social status are more likely to respond to the appeals of RRPs. The radical right promises to restore the status of those feeling left behind and provides a criterion of status – being native – that is independent from economic prosperity. Gidron and Hall (2017, 2019) provide comparative empirical evidence for the claim that the decreasing subjective status of low-educated men correlates with support for RRPs. Furthermore, lower status is associated with holding authoritarian values that are prominently promoted by RRPs (Chan and Goldthorpe 2007; Bornschier 2010). Hence, we also assume a negative association between subjective social status and RRP support.

In sum, previous studies show that two important features of stratification – income and social status – matter for RRP voting. This paper aims to understand how the macroeconomic trend towards rising income inequality influences the effect of these individual-level features.[2] We expect that increasing income inequality reinforces the effects of income and social status for two reasons. First, following relative deprivation theory, low-income and low-status individuals might support RRPs when their position deteriorates in relative terms. Second, higher income inequality increases the potential decline of higher-income and higher-status groups, who might support RRPs for fear of social decline. Thus, how income inequality affects RRP voting depends on whether the *actual* status and income position, the *fear* of decline, or both, matters.

Income inequality and relative deprivation

Our first mechanisms is based on *relative deprivation* theory (Runciman 1966). It argues that individuals with low relative incomes might feel deprived compared to individuals who are relatively better off – irrespective of absolute income levels and consumption possibilities (Hastings 2019). Rising income inequality implies a larger number of people who are left

behind in relative terms. Although the structure of inequality differs across countries (Lupu and Pontusson 2011), rising inequality always increases the distance between poor and better-off individuals, and so leaves low-income individuals in a state of higher relative deprivation compared to middle- and top-income groups. Many studies show that relative deprivation invokes feelings of angry resentment at being less well-off than one deserves (Pettigrew 2016), which in turn makes the RRP's cultural positions attractive (Elchardus and Spruyt 2012; Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck 2016). This leads to our first deprivation hypothesis:

H1a: As inequality increases, the likelihood of low-income respondents to support RRPs increases.

As discussed above, the consequences of inequality may go beyond increasing income disparities and extend to other indicators of social stratification. Rising income inequality has been found to magnify disparities in social status perceptions, as inequality affects the hierarchy among individuals who are more or less esteemed in society (Pichler and Wallace 2009; Ridgeway 2014; Paskov, Gërxhani, and van de Werfhorst 2017; Wilkinson and Pickett 2018). Rising inequality is also associated with status decline, particularly among low-income groups (Lindemann and Saar 2014; Gidron and Hall 2019). In the framework of relative deprivation, we expect that as inequality increases and status disparities grow, those with the lowest status levels feel even more deprived compared to individuals with higher status levels. Given rising inequality, deprived individuals with a sense of low social status are likely to find an alternative in RRPs who promise to restore their lost sense of social identity (Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck 2016; Gidron and Hall 2019).

H1b: As inequality increases, the likelihood of low-status respondents to support RRPs increases.

Income inequality and threat of social decline

Our second theoretical channel focuses on the *threat of social decline*, rather than actual deprivation. Major literature strands recently cast doubt on the role of material and social deprivation in explaining RRP support (Oesch 2008; Bornschier and Kriesi 2013; Kurer and Palier 2019). While these critiques do not refute economic explanations of RRP voting per se, they point to missing dynamics in deprivation-based theories: Few studies consider the possibility of a *future* decline in material and non-material conditions. We argue that based on risk theories, even individuals with higher incomes and status can feel threatened by social decline if income inequality increases the extent of the potential downfall. RRPs could then benefit from these anxieties associated with the threat of social decline.

In principle, rising income inequality implies larger *potential income losses* for high-income groups, as the gap between upper and lower parts of the distribution increases. However, risk is not equally distributed across income groups: the probability of income losses decreases as income rises (Rehm, Hacker, and Schlesinger 2012). Therefore, demand for insurance against economic risk becomes a powerful motivation among higher-income groups facing large potential losses (see e.g. Iversen and Soskice 2001; Moene and Wallerstein 2001; Rehm 2016). The implication of combining risk and potential income loss is that middle-income groups are unique in being exposed to large potential income losses *and* high probabilities of income loss. Hence, the threat of income decline is likely to be especially pervasive among middle-income individuals since their position brings together these two vulnerabilities.

Recent labour market changes further support the claim that threats of income decline particularly concern middle-income groups. Western democracies have witnessed widespread 'job polarisation' with a decline in medium-skilled jobs as technological change replaces labour in routine tasks (Autor, Levy, and Murnane 2003). These structural changes, along with

increasing inequality, generate insecurities and a sense of endangerment among workers in the middle of the skills and income distributions (Mau 2015). Unlike their radical left counterparts, who traditionally turn to the welfare state to respond to economic insecurity, RRPs subsume these perceived threats of decline into a broader framework of opposition to globalisation and open labour markets (Kriesi et al. 2008; Bornschier and Kriesi 2013; Kurer and Palier 2019). This leads to our 'threat of social decline' hypothesis with respect to income:

H2a: As inequality increases, the likelihood of middle-income respondents to support RRPs increases.

A similar 'threat of decline' mechanism applies to individuals' subjective social status. While empirical research shows that rising inequality affects status levels, it appears that inequality reduces status levels relatively uniformly across different groups (Layte and Whelan 2014; Lindemann and Saar 2014; Gidron and Hall 2019). Given these effects of inequality on the status hierarchy among both low- and high-status groups, we expect that individuals higher up in the status hierarchy become particularly concerned about a potential loss of status. One reason for this is 'last place aversion' (Kuziemko et al. 2014). When it comes to subjective perceptions of one's position in a hierarchy, most people want to avoid falling to the bottom. Moreover, a high status does not necessarily make individuals less likely to experience a decline in their status. In contrast to the risk of income loss, there is no objective risk function for subjective social status loss. Although social status correlates with income and class, it is an independent dimension of social stratification (Chan and Goldthorpe 2007) and the feeling of status decline might affect many different groups in society. As income inequality increases, the perceived threat of status decline gains importance for high-status individuals.

Our predictions are in line with Gidron and Hall's argument that people 'a few rungs up' the status hierarchy are most likely to be worried about status decline (Gidron and Hall 2017, S66). Status anxiety could even affect people with the highest status levels, because subjective

status decline is not closely associated with objective risk. Hence, as income inequality increases, groups with middle and high status might be threatened by the concomitant increases in status disparities and drawn to RRPs that offer to protect traditional social boundaries. This leads to our 'threat of social decline' hypothesis for subjective social status:

H2b: As inequality increases, the likelihood of middle- and high-status respondents to support RRPs increases.

In sum, our hypotheses generate predictions about the groups most likely to shift their support towards RRPs as income inequality increases. If the logic of *relative deprivation* applies, low-income and low-status individuals are drawn to RRPs because they are the main losers of rising inequality, as these groups have experienced actual deterioration in their income and status position. If, in contrast, the logic of *threat of social decline* applies, rising inequality would create income and status anxieties among individuals higher up the distribution, who then turn to RRPs to defend their position in the income and status hierarchy. Based on the anti-establishment nature of RRPs and their cultural emphasis on restoring or defending existing social boundaries, both mechanisms could apply at the same time. The effect of income inequality could also depend on the combination of status *and* income group; thus we also test the hypotheses with a three-way interaction model.

It is important to consider that in the relative deprivation logic, RRPs are not the only or even the most obvious electoral option. Many studies show that the most deprived individuals – for example, unemployed or precariously employed workers – find a valuable alternative in the radical left or simply abstain from voting (Emmenegger, Marx, and Schraff 2015; Rovny and Rovny 2017; Hooghe and Marks 2018). Since in this paper we focus on RRPs, we are unable to test the implications of our argument for support for the radical left and vote abstention. Hence, our hypotheses are not a full test of relative deprivation and threat of decline

theories, but rather probe how well these theories explain RRP support in different macroeconomic contexts.

Data

To test our hypotheses in cross-national perspective, we rely on data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) between 1987 to 2017. This significantly expands the time period covered by related studies using the European Social Survey from 2002 onwards (Rooduijn and Burgoon 2018; Burgoon et al. 2019), and allows us exploring the broader picture of RRP voting since income inequality started rising in many OECD countries in the 1980s. We selected advanced capitalist democracies in which survey respondents could choose a RRP. We excluded Eastern European countries, where inequality is closely linked with the transition to the market economy and not easily comparable with the transformations in Western democracies. Our final dataset consists of 14 OECD countries, 151 country-years, and 158,454 individuals for the period from 1987 to 2017.[3]

Radical right support

The dependent variable is a respondent's *support for a radical right party (RRP)* measured as a binary variable (RRP=1, non-RRP=0). The ISSP contains two variables that we use for RRP support. A first question asks which party the respondent has voted for in the last election. A second question asks about vote intention/general support (labelled party affiliation). We combine these two variables, replacing party vote with party affiliation when party vote is missing.[4] We define RRPs following Mudde (2007, 22f.) as parties that promote a nativist and authoritarian political platform combined with a populist discourse dividing the society into 'the corrupt elite' and 'the pure people'.[5]

Income

Income is measured as household income. To make the ISSP's interval categories comparable across countries and time, we assign midpoints to each income bracket and follow the approach in Donnelly and Pop-Eleches (2018) for the top category. Next, we account for differences in household size, dividing income by the square root of the number of household members. Finally, we generate five income quintiles from these harmonized income data. The quintiles group respondents into five equal-sized categories of income rank and allow us distinguishing non-linear differences among low-, lower-middle-, middle-, upper-middle- and top-income groups.

Income inequality

Income inequality is measured at the macro-level, using Gini indicators from the Standardized World Income Inequality Database (SWIID) (Solt 2016). Our inequality measures are based on market household income (before taxes and transfers). Relying on disposable income (e.g. Burgoon et al. 2019) assumes that individuals derive the same value for income from the labour market and public transfer income. Instead, we have reasons to expect that compensation by government transfers may not fully offset the feelings of deprivation and social marginalisation if people lose their labour market income, mainly because individuals attach strong societal value from their occupations (Kitschelt and Rehm 2014). We use short-run, medium-run and long-run measures of income inequality trends, assessing the change in the market income Gini across a four-year, eight-year and twelve-year window. All three measures are coded such as to reduce single-year fluctuations.[6] We anticipate that the long-run measure best captures structural long-run increases in inequality and is least influenced by cyclical swings in macroeconomic upturns and downturns (Pontusson and Weisstanner 2018).

Subjective social status

Subjective social status is measured with the top-bottom self-placement item in the ISSP, where respondents indicate their position in society on a scale from 1 (bottom) to 10 (top). The original wording of the question is as follows: *In our society, there are groups which tend to be towards the top and groups which tend to be towards the bottom. Below is a scale that runs from the top to the bottom. Where would you put yourself on this scale?* This 'social ladder' question has been validated and extensively used in existing research (Gidron and Hall 2017; Lindemann and Saar 2014).

Control variables

Within the data limits in the ISSP, we include a set of individual-level control variables: *age* (in years) and binary variables for *education* (tertiary education=1), *gender* (male=1) and *unemployment* (unemployed=1). We control for *social class* using the scheme by Oesch (2006). Finally, our models add a linear *time trend*, as explained in the model specification below. The main models do not include other potentially important contextual variables – immigration, trade openness, unemployment, GDP growth or welfare state expenditure – since neither was statistically significant and they do not substantively alter our findings (Online Appendix 4). Importantly, the results hardly change if we include immigration as a macro-level variable; we can reject the possibility that the conditional effects of inequality actually pick up the effects of immigration.

Methods

The empirical analysis is based on logistic regression models of whether a respondent supports an RRP, measured as a binary variable (RRP=1, non-RRP=0). Most of our models exclude respondents voting for radical left parties or abstaining.[7] This is the default strategy in previous

research on radical parties (Rooduijn et al. 2017; Rooduijn and Burgoon 2018), because the similar underlying socio-economic determinants of RRP support, radical left support and vote abstention would cancel each other out. Additional models that include radical left and abstention in the reference category indeed show that the explanatory power of socio-economic variables is weaker in these models since low socio-economic resources also tend to benefit the radical left and vote abstention. However, our main results are not affected by this decision (see Online Appendix 3).

To account for heterogeneity between countries (not explained by our model), we include country fixed effects and use robust standard errors clustered by country. The inclusion of fixed effects has both methodological and substantive reasons: Fixed effects ensure that our models indeed pick up changes over time (within-country changes) and they are necessary because we are unable to control for various other factors that likely account for RRP strength (e.g. supply-side factors). As both income inequality and RRP support seem to share an upward trend over time in many countries, we follow Kuhn et al. (2016) and add a time counter (measured in years, 1987=1) to account for this trend.[8] Online Appendix 3 shows that our results are not influenced by these methodological choices and are robust to a variety of alternative specifications.[9]

Findings

Table 1 presents average marginal effects from our main logistic regression models of RRP support. Model 1 shows RRP support compared to all other vote choices (including radical left and abstaining), while Models 2-5 exclude all respondents supporting the radical left or abstaining. The models reveal that both income and status explain differences in RRP voting, but both effects are not overly strong. Partly against our expectations of a negative association between income and RRP support, we find a non-linear effect of income. The probability for

RRP support is significantly higher among the lower-middle income quintile compared to the bottom quintile. Even the middle quintile tends to have a higher propensity of RRP support than the lowest income group, although the difference is not statistically significant. In substantive terms, the effects of income are modest. The probability for RRP support differs by only 0.99 percentage points between the most supportive income group (lower-middle quintile) and the least supportive income group (top quintile) in Model 1. These effects pale compared to education (3.32 percentage point difference between tertiary and non-tertiary educated respondents) or social class (4.24 percentage points difference between socio-cultural professionals and production workers).

Table 1: Logistic regressions of radical right voting

	1		2		3		4		5	
Income quintile (reference: bottom)										
Lower-middle	0.58**	(0.23)	0.57**	(0.23)	0.57**	(0.23)	0.56**	(0.23)	0.55**	(0.23)
Middle income	0.27	(0.19)	0.03	(0.20)	0.03	(0.20)	0.02	(0.20)	0.00	(0.19)
Upper-middle	-0.09	(0.23)	-0.46	(0.32)	-0.45	(0.32)	-0.45	(0.32)	-0.46	(0.32)
Top	-0.41	(0.30)	-0.82**	(0.40)	-0.81**	(0.40)	-0.83**	(0.40)	-0.83**	(0.40)
Subjective social status	-0.06	(0.09)	-0.23**	(0.11)	-0.24**	(0.10)	-0.23**	(0.10)	-0.25***	(0.07)
ΔGini market short-term					-0.51	(0.42)				
ΔGini market medium-term							0.48**	(0.21)		
ΔGini market long-term									1.12***	(0.35)
Tertiary education	-3.32***	(0.42)	-3.82***	(0.49)	-3.82***	(0.49)	-3.86***	(0.46)	-3.83***	(0.36)
Class (reference: self-employed)										
Technicians	-0.50	(0.44)	-0.49	(0.50)	-0.48	(0.49)	-0.48	(0.50)	-0.41	(0.48)
Production workers	1.51***	(0.58)	2.20***	(0.70)	2.19***	(0.69)	2.19***	(0.70)	2.20***	(0.71)
Managers	-1.12***	(0.31)	-1.33***	(0.37)	-1.34***	(0.36)	-1.32***	(0.37)	-1.29***	(0.35)
Clerks	-0.40	(0.38)	-0.32	(0.48)	-0.32	(0.48)	-0.33	(0.48)	-0.34	(0.46)
Socio-cultural professionals	-2.73***	(0.37)	-2.92***	(0.43)	-2.92***	(0.43)	-2.90***	(0.43)	-2.84***	(0.41)
Service workers	1.03*	(0.58)	1.64**	(0.68)	1.62**	(0.68)	1.63**	(0.68)	1.58**	(0.70)
Age	-0.00	(0.01)	-0.03	(0.02)	-0.03	(0.02)	-0.03	(0.02)	-0.03	(0.02)
Male	2.40***	(0.16)	2.75***	(0.22)	2.75***	(0.22)	2.75***	(0.23)	2.73***	(0.24)
Unemployed	0.35	(0.47)	0.84	(0.58)	0.85	(0.60)	0.82	(0.56)	0.80	(0.54)
Time-trend	0.27**	(0.11)	0.29**	(0.14)	0.29**	(0.14)	0.31**	(0.13)	0.38***	(0.10)
Country fixed effects	yes		yes		yes		Yes		yes	
Abstain & radical left excluded	no		yes		yes		Yes		yes	
N individuals	158,454		129,694		129,694		129,694		129,694	
N countries/country-years	14/151		14/151		14/151		14/151		14/151	
Pseudo R^2	0.12		0.13		0.13		0.13		0.13	

Note: * $p<0.1$; ** $p<0.05$; *** $p<0.01$. Numbers are average marginal effects, indicating the percentage point change in RRP voting probability. Based on logistic regression models with country fixed effects. Country-clustered standard errors in parentheses.

We find a significant negative effect of subjective social status on RRP support (as expected theoretically), but only in the models that exclude the options to vote radical left or abstain. The effect of subjective social status is also rather modest. In Model 1, the probability of RRP support only increases by 0.51 percentage points when switching from lowest to highest status. These small effect sizes for income and status are not surprising given that the reference category in Model 1 includes radical left supporters and abstaining voters, i.e. electorates with lower incomes and lower subjective social status. Unsurprisingly, the substantive significance

of the effects of income and subjective social status increase when excluding radical left voters and abstainers from the sample in Model 2.

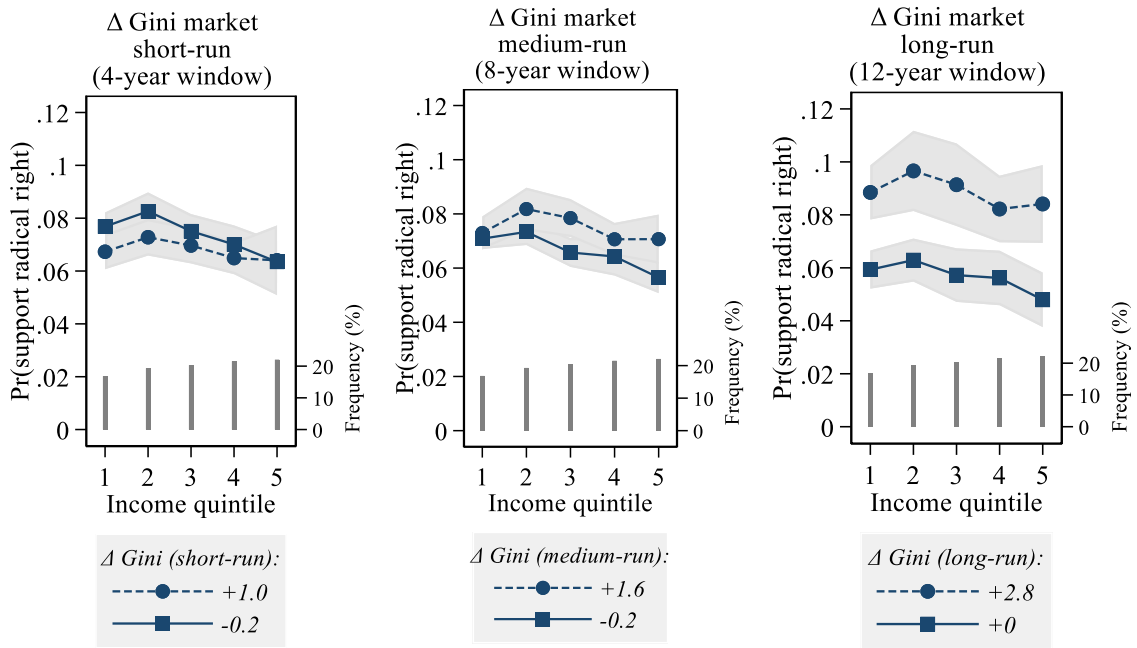
The remaining Models 3-5 introduce our measures for income inequality trends in the short-, medium- and long-run. Changes in income inequality turn out to increase the individual probability to support RRPs, but only in the medium and long run. This is consistent with our assumption that the latter indicate structural trends towards rising inequality, while short-term changes (measured over a four-year period) contain some cyclical variation and might be reversed. Short-run inequality changes are not statistically significantly related to RRP support and even have a negative sign. In contrast, inequality changes measured over an 8-year or 12-year period significantly increase the likelihood for RRP support. The long-run effect of inequality (Model 5) is large in substantive terms; a change from one standard deviation below the mean to one above the mean increases the predicted probability for RRP support by more than 3 percentage points. It should be noted that all other explanatory variables remain unchanged by including the inequality variables.

This baseline effect of inequality is difficult to interpret as evidence for our theoretical approaches, because inequality as a macro-level indicator comprises both winners and losers of stratification. Therefore, we move on to explore how the effect of inequality trends varies among different income and status groups.

Figure 1 presents predicted probabilities from interaction models between inequality and income quintiles (see Online Appendix 2 for the full results). The relative deprivation mechanism predicts a stronger effect of income inequality among low-income groups who experience a relative deterioration of their financial situation as inequality increases (H1a). If the threat mechanism is true, we should observe a stronger effect of rising income inequality among middle-income quintiles (H2a). The interaction terms are jointly significant at the 99 percent level for medium- and long-run inequality trends and not significant for short-run Gini

changes. To reveal more about the conditional relationships, we present predicted probability plots with 95 percent confidence intervals. We find that rising income inequality in the medium-run and especially in the long-run significantly increases the probability of RRP support for any income group. The right-hand panel of Figure 1 illustrates that rising market inequality one standard deviation above the mean (an increase of 2.8 Gini points over the 12-year window) has a slightly stronger effect on lower-middle, middle and top-income quintiles. However, the inequality effect does not differ statistically significantly between the income groups. Figure 1 bears out a clear pattern that rising inequality in the long-term significantly increases RRP support for all income groups – both the winners and losers – which could be consistent with both theoretical mechanisms that we proposed, namely the deprivation and the threat mechanism. Only the rising support among the top income group remains puzzling and contradicts both expected mechanisms.

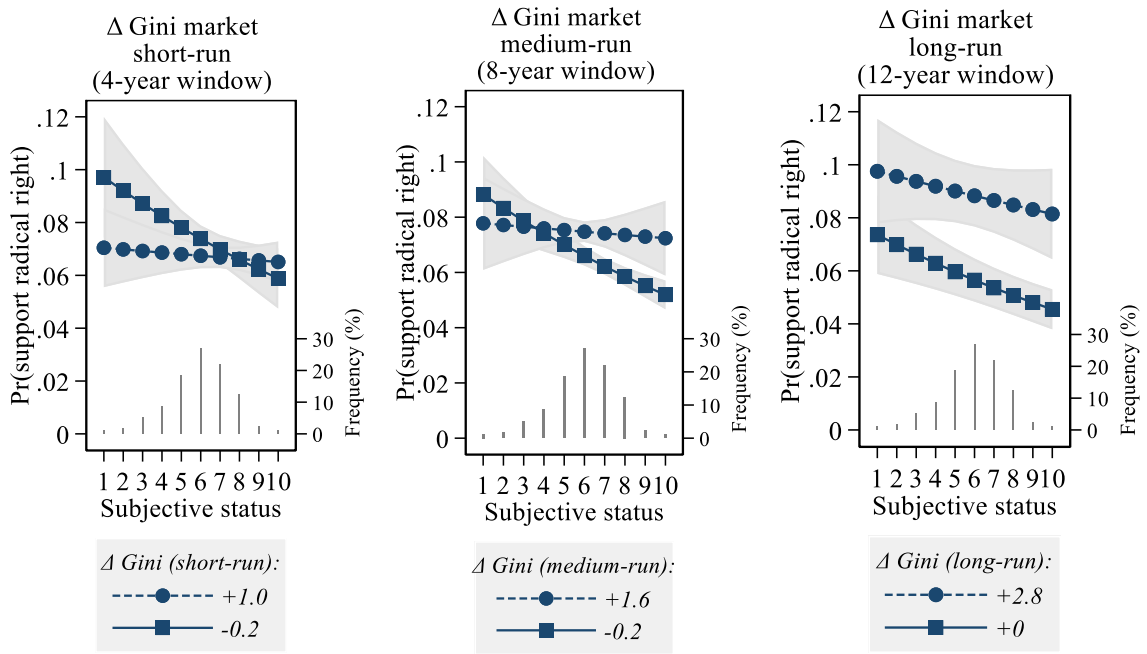
Figure 1: Inequality and radical right support (by income quintile)



Note: Δ Gini values = mean plus/minus one standard deviation. Full model: Online Appendix 2.

In Figure 2, we estimate an interaction term between inequality trends and subjective social status (SSS). We would expect rising RRP support among respondents with low SSS according to the relative deprivation theory (H1b), and rising RRP support among mid- and high-status respondents if the threat of social decline outweighs actual low status (H2b). The interaction terms of inequality changes and SSS are on the borderline of statistical significance (p=0.103 in the short-run, p=0.028 in the medium-run, p=0.226 in the long-run). However, the graphical inspection of the conditional effects in Figure 2 reveals telling patterns. Under rising inequality (in the short-, medium- or long-run), the likelihood to support RRPs increases more strongly among respondents with *higher* subjective social status. Furthermore, inequality trends affect the relationship between SSS and RRP support. Where inequality did not rise, subjective social status is statistically significant and negatively associated with RRP support. Rising inequality reverses this trend. Where inequality rose at above-average levels, the relationship between SSS and RRP support disappears. In other words, inequality increases RRP support more strongly among high-status respondents than among low-status respondents. This finding corroborates the claim that not those at the bottom tend to support RRP when inequality rises, but those that still have a higher position in society they fear to lose.

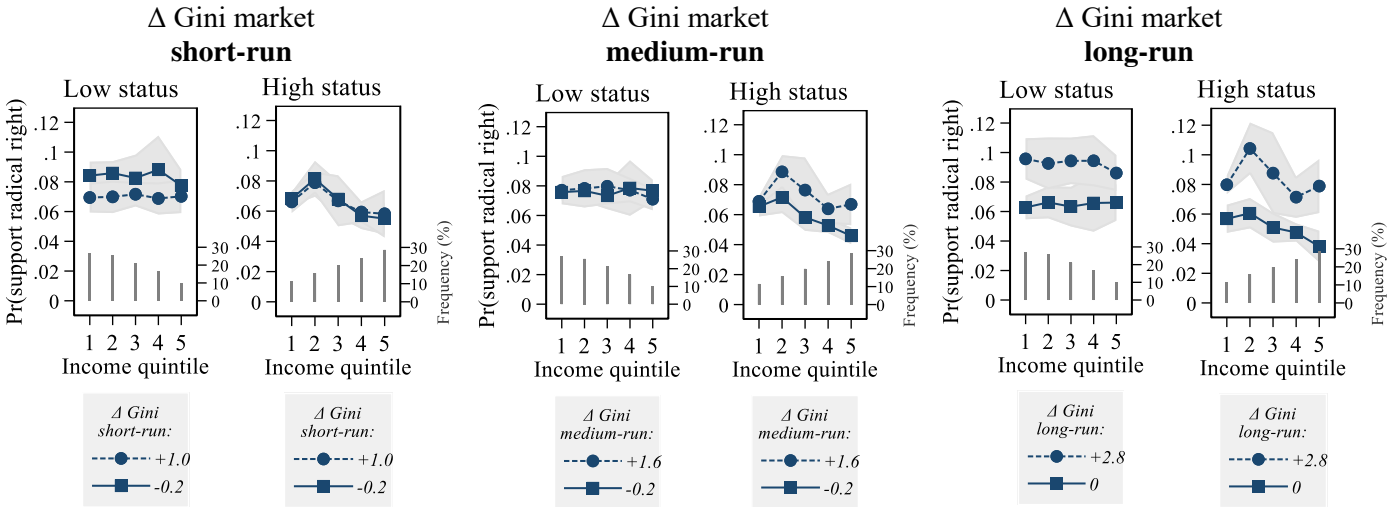
Figure 2: Inequality and radical right support (by subjective status)



Note: Δ Gini values = mean plus/minus one standard deviation. Full model: Online Appendix 2.

This is also confirmed when looking at the effects of inequality trends conditional on both income and subjective social status (SSS), based on three-way interaction models. Figure 3 estimates the conditional effect of inequality changes for each income quintile separately for representative values of 'low status' (4) and 'high status' (8). As in the previous models, we find that rising income inequality in the long-term perspective increases the likelihood of RRP support among all income groups. Other than we would expect from the relative deprivation theory, in a context of rising inequality, the largest increase in RRP support derives from individuals whose subjective social status is high and that do not belong to the lowest income group. Among those with high SSS, individuals in the lower-middle and middle income quintiles stand out to have the highest probability of RRP support as inequality increases. Lower-middle income groups with high status perceptions are hardly individuals that count themselves to the group of people that already experienced social decline. The rising likelihood of RRP voting among this group, however, suggests that they belong to the group of people that due to rising income inequality fear a decline in social and financial terms most.

Figure 3: Inequality and radical right support (by income and subjective status interacted)



Note: Δ Gini values = mean plus/minus one standard deviation. Low status=4, high status=8 (representing the bottom and top deciles in the status distribution). Full model: Online Appendix 2.

Our analysis leaves the question of how the *most deprived* citizens respond to rising inequality, given that they do not move in large numbers to RRPs, as our analysis showed. The most straightforward expectation is that the citizens with lowest income and status levels find a more valuable alternative in *radical left parties* (Rooduijn and Burgoon 2018). Radical left parties combine an anti-establishment discourse with demand for extensive state intervention and antipathy against market outcomes. Being at the bottom of the social hierarchy, these individuals would benefit from redistribution and might count on public transfers for a living. A full test of this argument is beyond the scope of this paper, but in Online Appendix 5 we find strong preliminary evidence that the deprivation mechanism is indeed more likely to apply for radical left parties than their RRP counterparts. Income inequality significantly increases radical left support, but this effect is most pronounced among low-income individuals (rather than middle- or high-income individuals), and radical left support is much stronger among low-status individuals (rather than high-status individuals). These preliminary findings point to fruitful avenues for further research, by examining how income inequality affects multiple vote choices, including abstention and political alienation.

Conclusion

In this paper, we shed light on the interplay of two recent phenomena affecting Western democracies: rising income inequality and the simultaneous increase in support for radical right parties (RRPs). Studies explaining rising RRP support over the last several decades often conclude that the people who feel 'left behind' in the processes of globalisation and economic modernisation are turning to RRPs. Income inequality allows us to measure to what extent people are left behind in relative terms. Therewith our study contributes to the debate about the economic sources of RRP support, whose effect, in the past, has mainly been tested in individual-level studies focusing on socio-economic characteristics and occupational patterns (Rooduijn et al. 2017; Rooduijn and Burgoon 2018; Rovny and Rovny 2017). Nevertheless, we argue that rising income inequality does not only bear implications for the economic approach to RRP support. Income inequality also manifests hierarchies based on social status as a separate category of stratification (Ridgeway 2014). Gidron and Hall (2017, 2019) argue that subjective social status is an important factor in understanding how economic conditions translate into support for RRPs that mainly politicize the cultural dimension. By cultivating nativism, RRPs promise to restore the status of those 'left behind' and deliver voters a non-economic source of prestige. Both income and social status have been shown to negatively correlate with RRP support. In this paper, we then analysed how rising inequality affects the probability of supporting RRPs among different income groups and status groups.

We argued that there are two possible ways for rising income inequality to affect RRP support. First, rising income inequality strengthens the effect of income on RRP support through the logic of relative deprivation (Runciman 1966). When inequality is increasing, people at the lower end of the income and status hierarchy feel relatively more deprived and strive for change that RRPs promise in their anti-establishment claims. Second, rising income

inequality increases the potential 'height of fall' for those who fear social decline. The effect of rising income inequality is then less pronounced among those already 'left behind' and reaches into the ranks of those who have more left to lose – the middle-income and high-status groups.

Our analyses of 14 OECD countries over the period between 1987 and 2017 confirms the reinforcing effect of rising income inequality on the probability of RRP voting among certain groups of income and status. This effect is strongest among individuals with middle incomes and high status. The general growth of RRP support in increasingly unequal societies should therefore not be traced back solely to those who have experienced an *actual decline* in income and social status. Rather, our results suggest that the voting behaviour of individuals higher up in the social hierarchy is even more crucial to understanding how income inequality fuels RRP support. We make the theoretical claim that this group is most likely to *fear social decline* and therewith turns towards RRPs. The two main thrusts of our argument are RRPs' stance against globalisation, which speaks to economic insecurities of middle-income workers, and their discourse to provide non-economic criteria of social status that pits natives against immigrants, which speaks to those worried about protecting their status in the social hierarchy. In contrast, the RRPs' anti-elitist stances are not enough to gain support among the most deprived voters, who are likely to have a material interest in more redistributive platforms than RRPs offer. To confirm these causal claims, future research should try to measure how income inequality affects the perceived anxiety of social decline among different groups in society, particularly the middle class, and test how this affects voting behaviour.

These results contribute to the literature on RRP support in several ways. First, the paper links the debate about support for RRPs among socio-economically weak constituents with one significant macroeconomic change observable over the past decades and shows that increasing income inequality is important in explaining patterns of support. Second, the results give

further evidence to Gidron and Hall's (2017, 2019) claim that RRP support is not about *either* the economy *or* culture. Rather, we have good reasons to believe that features of social hierarchies, such as subjective social status, function as an important link between economic well-being and support for radical parties. However, the relationship is less straightforward than Gidron and Hall suggest, as in our analysis, anxiety about losing subjective social status proves to be more important than actual decline.

Notes

[1] Online Appendix 1 shows that subjective social status is significantly associated with income, education and class, but these factors explain only a small fraction of the variance in subjective social status (R^2=0.24 in a fixed-effects model).

[2] We focus on short-run, medium-run and long-run inequality trends. We expect an effect of long-term changes, which voters are likely to notice as permanent changes of stratification. Short-term changes, in contrast, capture more cyclical inequality swings (Pontusson and Weisstanner 2018).

[3] The 14 countries are: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland.

[4] The correlation between radical right vote and affiliation is 0.52 (N=46,223) for those cases where both measurements are available. Our findings are substantively unaltered if we include a dummy for party affiliation.

[5] We coded parties in the ISSP using Armingeon *et al*. (2018), who provide an updated list of Mudde's original classification and only deviate in a few (borderline) cases: the Swiss People's Party (radical right from 1995 on), the Italian National Alliance, and the List Pim Fortuyn. We also deviate from Mudde and Armingeon *et al*. by classifying the Norwegian Progress Party as radical right, which turned from an anti-tax movement towards an anti-immigrant platform in the 1980s (see Oesch and Rennwald 2018, 789).

[6] The short-run trend measure is coded as: $\frac{1}{2}\sum_{i=0}^{1} Gini_{t-i} - \frac{1}{2}\sum_{i=2}^{3} Gini_{t-i}$; the medium-term measure as: $\frac{1}{4}\sum_{i=0}^{3} Gini_{t-i} - \frac{1}{4}\sum_{i=4}^{7} Gini_{t-i}$; and the long-term measure as: $\frac{1}{4}\sum_{i=0}^{3} Gini_{t-i} - \frac{1}{4}\sum_{i=8}^{11} Gini_{t-i}$.

[7] Radical left was coded according to March (2011) as parties that criticize the market economy, promote strong interventionist policies and, similar to the radical right, cultivate anti-establishment sentiments.

[8] We hasten to add that the increase in market inequality is not linear over time; inequality is particularly prone to jump in economic crises but can also decrease in other years (Pontusson and Weisstanner 2018). Hence, our results do not simply indicate a spurious relationship with a linear upward trend (that could be based on any unobserved variable). Our findings are substantively unaltered with country-specific time trends, without any time trend, or with quadratic or cubic polynomial time trends (see Online Appendix 3).

[9] We obtain similar results using multilevel logistic regressions, although the effects of inequality changes are estimated with slightly less precision. The interaction estimates, however, are substantially similar to our main specifications (see Online Appendix 3).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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